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Colin L. Powell

A Key Figure in Policy At the Revamped NSC

In February of last year, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North authored a handwritten note, later obtained by the Tower commission, listing "people who know" in the U.S. government of the secret arms dealings with Iran.

Third on the list of only 16 persons, behind Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, was Lt. Gen. Colin L. Powell, an official still largely unknown to the U.S. public and, to date, untarnished by his involvement in the Iran affair.

Powell's Iran arms-related dealings were as senior military assistant to Weinberger in 1983 through last summer. Since January, Powell has been in the even more important and politically sensitive post of deputy national security adviser to President Reagan and second-ranking official of the National Security Council staff.

From a small office in the west-wing suite of his boss and longtime friend, Frank C. Carlucci, Powell has quickly assumed an important role as convenor, coordinator and conciliator in U.S. foreign and defense policy.

Powell, who will celebrate his 50th birthday in two weeks, is unusual in several respects. The son of immigrant parents from Jamaica, he rose from the streets of New York City's South Bronx to become one of the highest-ranking black officers in U.S. Army history.

Despite the fact that he was first commissioned through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at City College of New York rather than at West Point, Powell is widely considered to be in the charmed circle of potential candidates to be Army chief of staff. If chosen, he would be the first black to hold that post.

As chairman of the NSC's Policy

Review Group, established by Carlucci as a key interagency mechanism for addressing national-security problems and airing differences, Powell is in position to decide what issues to consider, at what level and depth they should be studied and, perhaps most sensitive of all, who to include or exclude from the high-level discussion.

The long relationship of Carlucci and Powell with Weinberger has raised questions about their impartiality in policymaking, but to date there have been no complaints. There was speculation inside the White House that Powell helped to convey Weinberger's request that Reagan make a public statement—as he did in his radio address nine days ago—defending the defense secretary against criticism from the Tower commission. Powell denied that he did so, saying Weinberger "didn't need me" to make his views known.

One of the central errors of the Iran-contra policymaking, according to the commission and others who have examined the subject, was that consideration was restricted to such a tiny number of officials that neither the secret U.S. arms sales nor secret NSC staff support for the Nicaraguan contra rebels was subjected to rigorous examination in the government.

Powell, in an interview, said he and Carlucci are dedicated to practicing the politics of inclusion rather than exclusion in policymaking.

"Like Frank, I am a great believer that the interagency process works best when everybody has a chance to say his piece and get his positions out on the table . . . that when we forward the final decision package to the president or present it to him orally, everybody who played knows he has been properly represented and had his day in court," he said.

Powell's Policy Review Group, the latest incarnation of high-level interagency committees that have existed in one form or another for decades, is composed of representatives of the Central Intelligence Agency and the State, Defense and other departments at the undersecretary level.

Powell said the group meets at the White House two or three times almost every week to gather infor-

mation about national-security problems, discuss approaches to be taken and reach agreements between agencies, when possible. Recent meetings have dealt with Afghanistan, Central America and the Middle East, he said.

The National Security Planning Group is the administration's restricted-access NSC forum involving the president, his national security adviser and key Cabinet-level officers on foreign and defense issues. It reviews work done by the Policy Review Group and tackles issues not resolved at that lower level.

An official who has participated in formulation of several national-security decisions since Carlucci and Powell took over leadership of the NSC staff Jan. 2 said the two work as a team. "Frank provides the muscle, and Colin is the orchestrator of decisions . . . They're very comfortable working together," the official said.

Powell was involved as a top-level staff aide rather than policymaker in the arms sales to Iran. He recalled that, in the summer of 1985, he received "preliminary inquiries" from the NSC staff about the availability and pricing of TOW antitank missiles and that he soon learned that Iran was the likely recipient. "I provided the information to the NSC, a routine service that I would provide to any department," he said.

After Reagan's decision in January 1986 to sell arms to Iran from U.S. military stocks, Weinberger said recently, Powell, as his senior military assistant, "was the person I used to carry out the president's directions to make the arrangements for transferring the [Iran-destined] arms to the CIA." Weinberger added, "And there it ended."

Powell, asked if he feels that he should have done something differently, replied, "I'm very comfortable with the role I performed in this transaction, [that] it was correct and adequate to the circumstances. I've got no second thoughts about that . . . A correct instruction had been received by the secretary of defense that was legally sufficient, and we were executing that instruction."

No accusations have been made against Powell for his role in the Iran arms affair. He said "the appropriate questions were asked" by White House officials and satisfactorily answered before he took over his present job.

Neither the national security adviser nor his deputy is subject to Senate confirmation in those jobs but, because he remains on active duty, Powell was confirmed by the Senate March 11 as an Army lieutenant general on special assignment at the NSC. He had been nominated to and confirmed in three-star rank last year when he left Weinberger's office at the Pentagon to become commander of the 5th Corps in Germany.

Unlike some politically oriented officers who have served in sensitive policy posts, Powell has had extensive military command experience and, he said, still considers himself "first and foremost an infantryman with 29 years service."

In the 1960s, Powell was adviser to a South Vietnamese infantry battalion on the Laotian border and later executive officer of a U.S. infantry battalion and operations officer of a U.S. infantry division in Vietnam. In the 1970s, he was an infantry battalion commander in Korea and commanded an airborne infantry brigade in the United States. In the 1980s, Powell has been assistant commander of a tank division in Colorado and, from last summer until his present job, commanded the 72,000 5th Corps troops.

Since 1972, Powell has had a parallel career in policy-related posts. This began when, as an Army major and White House fellow, he was picked to work for a year for Carlucci, then deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget headed by Weinberger. Powell later

served as senior military assistant to the deputy defense secretary in the Carter administration and stayed for four months after Reagan was elected and Carlucci moved into the No. 2 Pentagon job, again under Weinberger. In 1983, after two years of Army command experience, Powell became Weinberger's top military assistant.

"I had a strong, close family," Powell said. His father, a laborer in the garment district of New York, and his mother, a seamstress, expected their children "to do something with our lives," he said.

From the time he joined the ROTC, Powell recalled, "I liked soldiering and serving my country." Sitting behind his desk in civilian clothes, Powell said he would have preferred to remain in Germany as a corps commander.

He took the job at Carlucci's request, he said, because "I'm a serviceman, a soldier, and it looked like my service might be of greater use here."

Don Oberdorfer

Background: Deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs and lieutenant general, U.S. Army. Commanding general, U.S. Army 5th Corps, Frankfurt, Germany, June 1986 to January 1987; senior military assistant to Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, July 1983 to June 1986; other military and policy posts since being commissioned a second lieutenant in 1958. Education: B.S. in geology, City College of New York, 1958; master's degree in business administration, George Washington University, 1971. Awarded 13 military medals, including Purple Heart. Age 49.

BY RICH LIPSKI—THE WASHINGTON POST